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SUBJECT: LABOR MINISTER ON LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN
ADDRESSING LABOR ISSUES

REF: AMMAN 7687

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Jordan's Labor Minister Basem Salem reports that his Ministry has intervened directly to prevent Jordanian garment factory management from sending foreign workers back to their home countries without due process. The Minister issued a letter September 22 stating that no worker can be sent home without the permission of the Ministry. The Ministry is also finalizing draft amendments to the labor law that would bring it into line with ILO standards. The Prime Minister visited the Ministry on October 3 to discuss these issues. Salem also noted a privately-funded study which shows that more Jordanian workers would be more willing to work in factories if the salaries were higher. END SUMMARY.

ENDING FORCED REPATRIATIONS

12. (SBU) Labor Minister Basem Salem told Charge on October 5 that he had personally intervened two days earlier to prevent garment factory managers from putting foreign laborers on planes home without enjoying due process under the law. He noted that he issued a letter on September 22 to the Jordan Garment and Textile Manufacturers Association (JGATE) and to others in the private sector directing that garment manufacturers should send no foreign worker home from Jordan without the permission of the Ministry of Labor. In addition, he instructed those manning the new Ministry QIZ worker hotlines to highlight the September 22 directive, and had issued a circular describing the directive to the factories for the workers as well. Salem concluded by noting that the factory owner involved in this recent case had "been a problem" previously and that the Minister might be forced to close the factory.

AMENDING THE LABOR LAW

13. (SBU) Salem also provided the latest details on the current status of his effort to amend the labor law he had announced at the September 18 Labor Forum meeting held as part of the U.S.-Jordan FTA Joint Committee (JC) talks (reftel). Salem said he had just received and would review the recommended amendments prepared by an interagency committee. All the amendments had already been endorsed by the ILO, he said. He described these amendments as "JC plus," meaning that they included all amendments he had announced at the Joint Committee meeting in addition to a number of others. NOTE: We will report the ILO's expert assessment once translations are complete. END NOTE. Labor Ministry staff were preparing implementing regulations in

order to be ready when Parliament passes the law. NOTE:
Parliament enters into session again November 28. Post will
obtain a copy of the draft as soon as possible. END NOTE.

THE PM AND OTHER MINISTERS VISIT THE MINISTRY OF LABOR

¶4. (SBU) The Minister commented that Prime Minister Bakhit visited his Ministry on October 3 for an iftar to break the fast during the month of Ramadan. Bakhit brought with him a number of other ministers, including the Deputy Prime Minister/Finance Minister, Planning Minister, and Minister of Industry and Trade, among others. Although he gave no details, Salem said that the QIZ labor issues had been "at the top of the agenda" during these discussions.

GETTING JORDANIANS TO WORK IN FACTORIES:
SALARIES ARE THE PROBLEM

¶5. (SBU) Salem reported on a study the Ministry had commissioned, but which had been funded by the private sector, which indicated that unemployed Jordanians would be willing to work in garment factories, but not for the salaries currently being offered. He said this proved that the "culture of shame" blamed for the inability to recruit Jordanians to work in these factories was overstated. According to the study, 69% of Jordanians surveyed would be willing to work in a factory for a "decent" wage, which the poll defined as 200 Jordanian dinars (US\$ 280) per month roughly twice the current average wage offered in the QIZs.

¶6. (SBU) Of the unemployed surveyed, 29% had been offered jobs in factories and refused. Of those who refused, Salem said that 33% had given the salary as the reason, 28% had cited the long hours, and only 11% had cited the culture of shame. Salem intends to publish the study, which is in Arabic, shortly.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: The GoJ is continuing to address the issues raised in the recent AFL-CIO complaint. The Jordanians were heartened by the comment in the latest report from the National Labor Committee that 80% of the garment factories in Jordan had improved substantially since the first NLC report in May 2006. The NLC report alleged there were still significant problems in the sector, but gave Jordan credit for progress made to date. Meanwhile, the USAID-funded external assessment program has begun its three-month work program, assessing many of these same factories against international standards.
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